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Making Choices About Salvaging Wet or Flood Damaged Carpet

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Wet carpet can lead to the growth of biological pollutants presenting a health risk. Bacteria, fungi, mildew, and dust mites can thrive on wet surfaces. Bacteria, fungi and mildew can deteriorate fabrics, cause musty odors and produce spores which can present a health risk.

If carpet has been under floodwater, it should be discarded or steam-cleaned and dried thoroughly. When handling and cleaning water-damaged carpet, wear rubber gloves for protection. Sharp objects may be concealed in the carpet. Carpet that has been heavily contaminated with floodwater, sewage, pesticides, or other unknown toxic materials in flood water and residue should be discarded.

You may be able to save carpet that has been soaked with clean rain water. Contact a professional carpet cleaner or restorer for cost estimates and to suggest alternatives. If professional cleaning is not an option and the carpet is safe to attempt to clean, the following procedures may be attempted. However, damage to the carpet backing and dye may result.

Check to see if insurance covers any water or flood damaged floorings. Estimate the value of the carpet compared to the cost of trying to salvage it. Before you dispose of the carpet, contact your insurance company to see if they need to see the damage or need a sample or photograph. Keep records of your discards for insurance or tax purposes and for an adjuster to estimate the value.

Removing Carpet

Most wall-to-wall carpet that can be saved is best cleaned by a professional carpet cleaner or restorer. If you must attempt to salvage the carpet yourself, remove the carpet and discard the pad. Carpet with a foam backing should also be discarded. After the carpet has been damaged by flood water, the first step is to remove the carpet and padding from the floor. This should be done immediately to minimize damage to the underlying floor and to reduce mildew and odors in the house. To remove the carpet, roll it and take it outside. If the carpet is too heavy due to the water, allow the carpet to drain while on saw horses, but do not allow it to dry while rolled. If the carpet is going to be saved it will stretch if it dries

while rolled.

Carpet Cleaning Outdoors

Carpet with a separate padding, unattached carpet and area rugs can be cleaned outdoors. After removing the carpet and padding, discard the padding. Outdoors, with a hose, spray water on the carpet, moving from one end to the other to remove debris. Turn the carpet over and repeat spraying water on the back and then again on the face.

Apply a carpet shampoo or an all-purpose cleaner to thoroughly clean the carpet or rug. If using a carpet shampoo, apply it according to manufacturer's instructions. When removing the shampoo, to minimize soiling be certain that no residue remains. For an all purpose cleaner, apply it to the carpet or rug and allow it to soak for few minutes (do not use full strength ammonia and do not use ammonia on wool fibers). Spray the carpet or rug again with water to remove the carpet shampoo or all purpose cleaner. After the carpet or rug has been rinsed, use a wet-and-dry vacuum to remove water and dry the carpet quickly to reduce mildew.

Carpet Cleaning On Site

This method may be used for carpets glued to a concrete floor with a drain. To remove the water and debris, use a wet-and-dry vacuum or spray with a hose beginning at the furthest distance from the drain working toward the drain. Apply a carpet shampoo or an all-purpose cleaner in the same method as for carpet cleaning outdoors.

After the carpet or rug has been thoroughly rinsed, use a wet-and-dry vacuum to remove water. To minimize mold and mildew, run a central air conditioner, dehumidifier or fans to accelerate the drying process, if power is available and it is safe to do so. (Use safety procedures with electricity and wet floors.) If the carpet does not clean or it becomes mildewed, remove it and clean according to the process given for cleaning carpet outdoors.

Sanitizing The Carpet

To "sanitize" the carpet, a disinfecting solution must be used but may change the carpet color and damage the fiber. Do not use bleach on wool carpet; instead, try pine-oil cleaners. Wear rubber gloves. The sanitizing solution suggested is 1/2 to 3/4 cup of chlorine bleach to one gallon of water (follow manufacturer's recommendations for disinfectant purposes; bleach may damage some dyes and textiles, do not use on wool fibers). TEST the disinfectant being used on an inconspicuous spot to determine possible carpet color change or damage. While the carpet is damp, work in small sections, pouring the solution onto the carpet and rubbing it with a plastic scrub brush. Let the solution soak for about five minutes and rinse with a hose to thoroughly remove any residue. Repeat the process until the entire carpet has been sanitized.

Note: Disinfectants include chlorine bleach, phenol, ammonium chloride and pine oil. Follow specific label directions for their use. Disinfectants may damage some materials. If a septic tank is present, try to keep the disinfectant residue out of the septic tank system.

Slight Water/Moisture Damage

If a corner of the carpet has become wet and it cannot easily be removed, have a professional clean the

carpet. If you must clean it yourself, use a carpet shampoo. Dry the carpet thoroughly by using dehumidifiers and fans. Try to raise the damaged section of the carpet so air can move under that area. It may be necessary to pull up the section that is wet and allow drying of the back side. Disinfectants and products labeled as a mildewcide can reduce potential mildew and mold growth, but may not stop it entirely.

To keep mildew and mold under control, reduce the moisture level by using dehumidifiers, increase air circulation, remove dirt and grime that can serve as a food source for molds and mildews, and use a mildewcide following directions on the label. The carpet may need to be restretched and relayed by a professional.

Solve the moisture problem before relaying any carpet. Identify whether the moisture is from drainage toward the home, high water table, downspout blocked or not extended correctly, window wells, cracks in walls, etc. If future water damage is still possible, consider using an area rug or detached carpet and separate pad or a flooring recommended for high moisture areas. Synthetic carpet fibers such as olefin are more resistant to mildew than jute.

Key Points

- Lower the humidity by opening the house if humidity level is lower outdoors.
- Use fans to move air and dry
- Run dehumidifiers
- Use disinfectants
- Some businesses specialize in drying out flooded buildings
- Caution: Do not work on wet carpets where there is a possibility of electrocution.

Adapted in part from:

Munson, D. & Hedrick, A. (August, 1993). How to Save Upholstered, Furniture, Carpet, Bedding. Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Stone, J. & Yearn, M. (August, 1993). Making Choices About Cleaning Wet Carpet. Ames, IA: Iowa State University, University Extension.

For additional information, contact your Cooperative Extension office.

HEG 88-232 Carpet Selection: Construction and Texture

HEG 88-231 Carpet Selection: General

HEG 88-234 Rug Selection and Use

EC 88-422 Household Cleaning and Laundry Products: Which one for the Job?

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